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SUBJECT: THAI CIVIL SOCIETY RAISES PUBLIC AWARENESS ABOUT BURMA

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) For the first time ever, Chiang Mai University (CMU) held a public meeting on Burma designed to increase awareness of the problems caused by the Burmese regime's repressive policies and encourage students to pay closer attention to the plight of the Burmese people. The gathering was well-attended by university students and faculty, as well as Burmese exiles. Separately, a loose grouping of students and NGOs led by a CMU professor issued a statement calling for respect for democracy in Burma that was broadcast by CMU radio. These events may mark the beginning of increased activism on Burma by Thais in the northern part of the country after years of indifference toward the situation there. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On October 2, Consulate staff attended Chiang Mai University's first ever public discussion on Burma, which was attended by approximately 200 students and university staff. Panelists included Toe Zaw Latt from the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) General Secretary Lian Sakhong, and Charm Tong of the Shan Women's

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Action Network (SWAN). The exile activists provided their perspective on recent events in Burma, as well as some basic background information on a wide range of issues, including refugees, health, and the plight of women inside the country. They appealed to the audience to pay closer attention to events in Burma, emphasizing that what happens inside Burma directly affects Thailand.

¶3. (U) Charm Tong (SWAN) called openly on the Thai government to implement a "clear-cut" policy regarding refugees from Burma, particularly affording them proper protection and granting asylum. She also called on the Thai government to halt joint investment projects in Burma, particularly in ethnic areas, making specific reference to a proposed hydroelectric dam planned on the Salween River. In his speech, Lian Sakhong (ENC) highlighted the effects of the deteriorating situation inside Burma on the Southeast Asian region as a whole, emphasizing in particular problems caused by refugees, disease, and narcotics trafficking. He asserted that the Burmese regime's main lifelines are: Chinese aid, trade and investment; revenue from narcotics trafficking; and trade with ASEAN. Lian Sakhong also made an impassioned appeal to the attendees to pay close attention to events in Burma and their impact on Thailand, even in the midst of the active domestic Thai political scene.

¶4. (U) On October 3, the day after the CMU-hosted discussion, a loose grouping of students and NGOs called "Protection of Democracy and the Environment," which is led by a CMU professor, issued a statement that was broadcast on CMU radio condemning the violent crackdown on the demonstrators by Burmese authorities. The statement called on key regional players, such

as China, India and ASEAN, to come up with a clear plan to solve the "Burma problem," including the suspension of investment, particularly in natural resource projects. Lastly, the statement called for the general public to pressure governments to help return democracy to Burma.

COMMENT

¶5. (SBU) Though the CMU discussion and subsequent public statement will not change the course of events on the ground inside Burma, we believe they are significant. CMU has never hosted a public gathering to discuss Burma before, and it is not common for Thai civil society groups to speak out bluntly about Burma. These events may signal the beginning of an attitudinal change on the part of some segments of Thai society from indifference to the plight of the Burmese people to recognition that the Burmese regime's repression impacts the Southeast Asian region as a whole, and that Burma's neighbors can and should play a constructive role in solving the country's problems. We will continue to monitor Northern Thai civil society groups to determine whether they expand upon these nascent efforts.

¶6. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Bangkok and Rangoon.

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